The Freethought Society News

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Articles on topics of interest to freethinkers are welcomed and will be considered for publication.

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The Backstory of Dragon Con's Skeptic Parade Entry

by Margaret Downey

There is no better place in the world for skeptics to publicly promote the values of critical thinking, the courage to question authority and tradition, and the importance of learning more about skepticism than Dragon Con. The Freethought Society (FS) discovered this opportunity 18 years ago when **Derek Colanduno** invited me to speak at Dragon Con. I spoke about the creation of the Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center, introducing my character, "The Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Nurse," to the directors of the convention. I have been welcomed at Dragon Con ever since.

In 2009, I walked alone in the parade. The movie Avatar had just been released, and I chose as my costume a symbol of unity and community. In the movie, the Hometree serves as the physical home and dwelling place of the forest-dwelling Omatikaya clan. To make sure I could hold onto the headpiece, the species I used to design the costume was a weeping willow. The choice was fitting, since Avatar also highlights the Tree of Souls, a glowing, willow-like tree that is a sacred site for the clan, and the Tree of Voices, a smaller, related type of willow tree where the Na'vi can hear or connect with the "voices" of their ancestors.

For the next two years, I entered the Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center concept, with about 10 people marching as doctors and nurses carrying symbols of superstitions. The concept was eventually abandoned because of the huge number of items needed to dress the participants. At that point, I asked Colanduno if he had ever thought about entering skeptics into the parade. He said he would support the idea but had no time to assist. Thus began my assignment as the Dragon Con Skeptic Entry Coordinator.

It was decided that the Freethought Society (FS) would be recognized as an important Skeptrack team member, and we were invited to display our banner in the meeting room. An area in the back of the room was designated as the Loaner Costume Distribution Center. Plans got underway for me to register the group each year, provide loaner costumes, create signage, set up the loaner area, and clean and maintain the costumes for use year after year.

Our very first skeptic entry included a Star Car driven by Dr. **Angie Mattke**. The very first passenger was **James** "The Amazing" **Randi**. We had lab technicians holding the banner, along with various characters such as a "Fairy Godless Mother" and Houdini. It was a hit! I was encouraged to keep building the parade entry, and soon we had a large collection of costumes and signs that could be used in a wordplay section as well as a Skeptics in History section. Dr. Mattke offered her house as a storage area and became the official Star Car driver. Over the years, she has driven skeptic stars such as **John de Lancie**, **Cady Coleman**, and, most recently, actors **Jon Huertas** and **Seamus Dever**.

Reflecting on this history fills me with pride. I'm now considered the founder of the Skeptic Parade Entry at Dragon Con, but it is time to hand the challenge to someone who can continue the tradition with enthusiasm and dedication.

David Condo, who is currently the vice president of FS, attended Dragon Con as my assistant in 2025. He liked the project and volunteered this year, not only to attend as an assistant, but to also learn everything about coordinating the parade entry. I will continue training Condo in 2027, but I am confident that he will soon outshine my reputation.

Condo has already brought wonderful ideas for packaging the loaner costumes, storing them more efficiently, and setting up the Loaner Costume Distribution Center without too much fuss. Between now and Labor Day Weekend 2027, we will develop three or four new costume options designed to offer cooler styles and additional wordplay opportunities. We are also designing a Skeptic Scooters section, which will allow more people to participate who may not be able to walk the 1.2-mile parade route. Fun times ahead!

Dragon Con 2026 Skeptic Parade Entry Photos



The most important job of the Skeptics parade entry are banner carriers. They lead the group announcing that the Skeptics are coming.

Their "Skeptic Hero" banner carrier costumes are designed to emphasize their importance. Banner carriers are supplied with an orange T-shirt, cape, and white baseball hat.

Left to right holding the Skeptics banner are **Christa DeWald**, **Shana Pedroncelli**, and **Heiko DeWald**.

Below is the Skeptic Star Car which follows the banner. The driver of the car is Dr. **Angie Mattke**. Dressed in a beaded formal Dr. Mattke honored the style, music, and life of **Dolly Parton**.



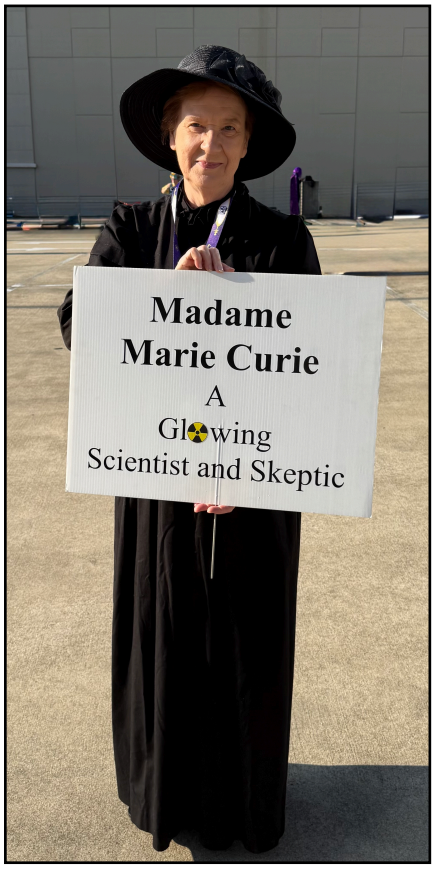
Pictured above with Dr. Mattke are Skeptic stars **Jon Huertas** and **Seamus Dever**. They performed together on the ABC television series *Castle* for eight seasons, spanning seven years from 2009 to 2016.





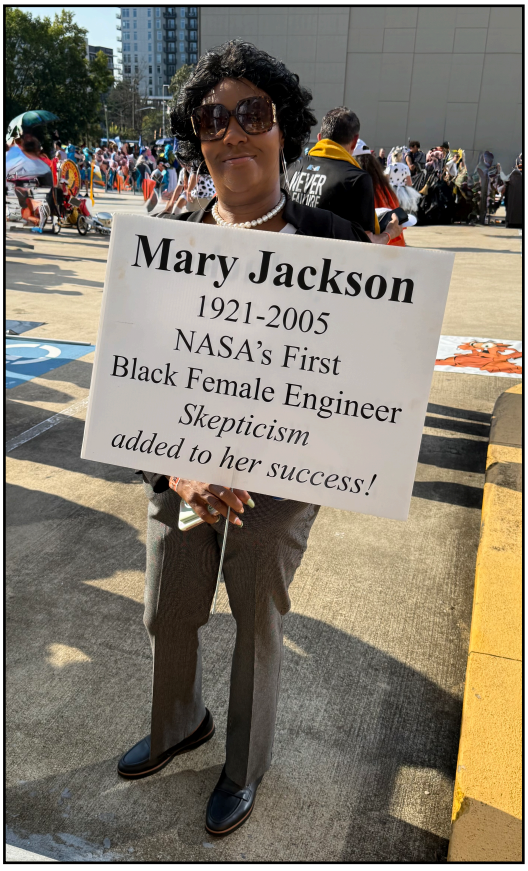
Pictured above right is Freethought Society president **Margaret Downey** proudly displaying a popular **Carl Sagan** quotation. Downey said that several children along the parade route excitedly proclaimed "That's so true. We are all star stuff!"

Picture in the upper right photo is **Dana Bevan** portraying **Lynn Conway.** Bevan has published four books on transgender science and and is a very popular Skeptrack presenter at Dragon Con.



Cathy Miller, a newly elected Freethought Society board member, loves to portray her favorite scientist Madame **Marie Curie**.
Miller stated that she is always pleasantly surprised to see many children shout out to her for special attention, which she happily provides.
Miller enjoys stopping along the 1.2 mile parade route to interact with both children and adults.

Portraying **Mary Jackson** for the third year in a row is **Mandisa Thomas**, president and founder of Black Nonbelievers (BN).
While the group is headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia there are BN chapters in Richmond, Virginia, Columbus, Ohio, Chicago, Illinois, Charlotte, North Carolina, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Columbus, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan.



More Dragon Con 2026 Skeptic Parade Entry Photos







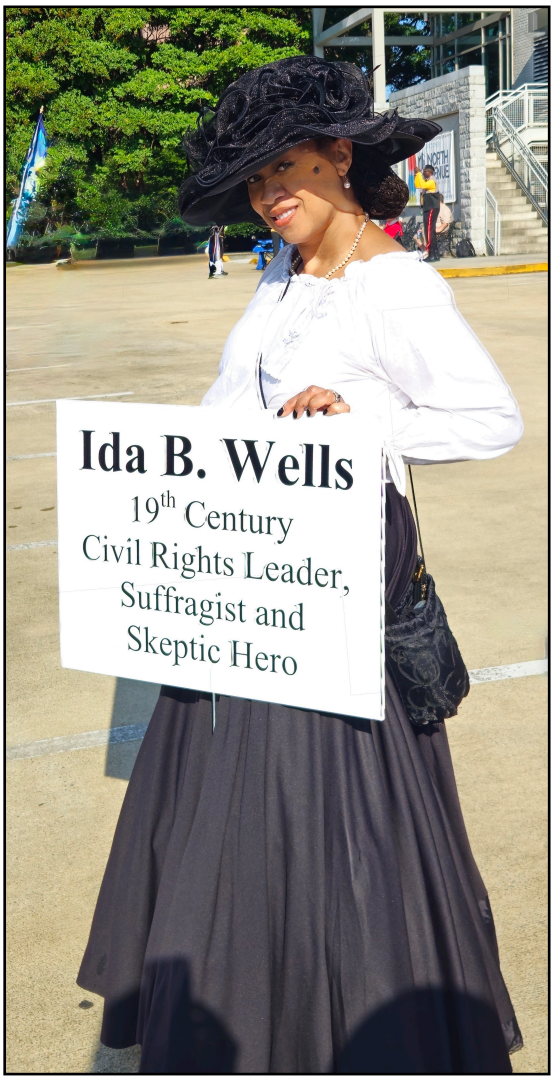
The Truth Fairy character is a very popular member of the Skeptics parade entry. **Jon Anderson** enjoys interacting with people who line the streets of Atlanta each year.

Pictured with Jon is his mother **Bonita Anderson**. She enjoys portraying great women of the past. She has walked as **Hypatia** and, this year, as **Aspasia** of Miletus.

Above right is **Sandra Leeson** portraying **Jane Goodall.** Skeptics never portray a living person. Portraying famous deceased people is our way of honoring their legacy.

For the fourth year in a row **James Kovalcin** interacts with onlookers as a fake news journalist. He conveys that at the Skeptrack people will find truth, facts, and evidence only.

Comedian extraordinaire, **Leighann Lord** has been portraying **Ida B. Wells** for eight years. Onlookers love her!

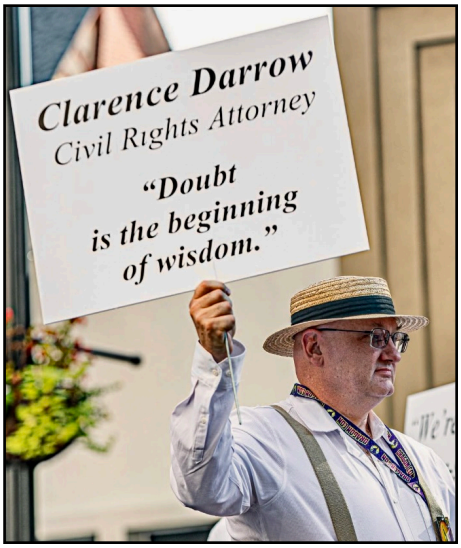


Protesters, pictured right are an annual fixture along the Dragon Con parade route. Attendees and parade walkers have turned dealing with them into an inside joke. Cosplayers routinely gather around them to mock or drown them out. Other attendees counteract their messages by holding satirical signs or simply ignoring them completely. The religious protesters at the Dragon Con parade site are not part of one single, cohesive organization, but are typically independent, highly fundamentalist Christian street preachers and evangelism ministries who want to draw attention to their overtly religious messages and harass parade participants.



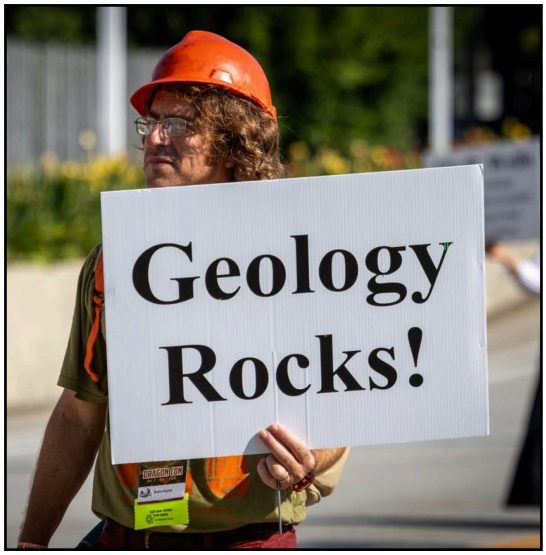


David Condo, vice president of the Freethought Society, is pictured walking in the parade in a pit crew outfit conveying a sports car skeptic wordplay sign.



At left, pictured is deputy editor of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine **Ben Radford**, portraying famous attorney **Clarence Darrow**. Radford authored, coauthored or contributed to over twenty books and written over a thousand articles and columns on a wide variety of topics including urban legends, unexplained mysteries, the paranormal, critical thinking, mass hysteria, and media literacy. Radford regularly speaks at universities and conferences about his research projects, skepticism, folklore, and science.

The photo of **Jim Hughes** participating in the Sketpics parade entry was taken by **Rachel Awesome**, who was standing on the opposite side of the street from where other photos on this page were taken. He was proud to promote a science-based occupation and later said that he had always wanted to be a geologist!



Thomas Paine Memorial Moves One Step Closer to Obtaining a Prestigious Washington, D.C. Location

The effort to bring Thomas Paine the recognition he deserves as a Founder and patriot moved another significant step forward when on September 15, 2026, the House Committee on Natural Resources (HCNR) unanimously voted to support the Common Sense 250 Act of 2026 (H.R. 9600) – legislation to authorize the Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA) to place its memorial in Area One of Washington, D.C.

For TPMA, this moment is a milestone on its long journey through the federal memorial process, securing an appropriate location, building bipartisan congressional support, and making the case that Thomas Paine belongs among the historic figures commemorated in the nation's capital. The legislation now moves to the next stage of the congressional process.

H.R. 9600 was introduced by Congressman **Jamie Raskin** (D-MD-08) and Congresswoman **Victoria Spartz** (R-IN-05). The bill would approve the location of the Thomas Paine memorial within Area One, which is a portion of Washington reserved for honoring individuals and subjects of preeminent historical and lasting significance to the United States.

The story began several years ago. In December 2022, Congress, the Senate and President **Joe Biden** authorized the Thomas Paine Memorial Association to establish a commemorative work on federal land in the District of Columbia and its environs. That authorization was an important first step, but it did not give TPMA permission to place the memorial in Area One. The authorization only allowed the project to proceed under the federal Commemorative Works Act. That distinction is important because the federal memorial process treats Area One differently from other locations.

Under the Commemorative Works Act, the Secretary of the Interior or the Administrator of General Services may recommend an Area One location after seeking the advice of the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission (NCMAC). An Area One recommendation, however, does not complete the process. Congressional approval is required for an Area One location. Federal law specifically provides that an Area One location is not authorized unless Congress approves it by law following the required notification process.

That is why TPMA decided to not wait for a letter from the Secretary of the Interior. The Association had already invested considerable time in the federal site-selection process and in September 2024, TPMA presented its proposed locations to NCMAC and made the case for an Area One site. NCMAC's records show that the Commission recommended Area One for the Thomas Paine memorial.

NCMAC's role is advisory. The Commission examines memorial proposals for compliance with the Commemorative Works Act and makes recommendations to the Secretary, the Administrator of General Services, and Congress. The Association therefore faced a practical question: Should TPMA wait for the Executive Branch process to produce a formal recommendation to Congress and then begin the congressional approval process, or could Congress directly approve the Area One location?

TPMA chose to pursue the latter path. The decision was particularly timely because 2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* as well as the nation's 250th anniversary. Rather than allow another lengthy procedural step to delay consideration of the memorial, TPMA worked with congressional allies to pursue legislation that would directly address the remaining legal requirement: congressional approval of an Area One location.

That effort resulted in H.R. 9600, the Common Sense 250 Act of 2026. The bill does not replace the memorial authorization TPMA already received in 2022. Instead, it addresses the next piece of the process by approving the memorial's location within Area One.

On September 2, 2026, the House Natural Resources Committee's Federal Lands Subcommittee held a legislative hearing on the bill. **Annie Laurie Gaylor**, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and secretary of TPMA, testified before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands in support of H.R. 9600. Her testimony included acknowledgement of Thomas Paine's contributions to the founding of the United States and emphasized the urgency of moving the project forward.

Also in attendance on September 2 was world-renowned sculptor **Zenos Frudakis**. He provided a large color poster as an example of the Thomas Paine statue. The clay model is currently housed at the Frudakis Studio in Glenside, Pennsylvania.

The September 2nd HCNR meeting can be viewed at the below link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zELc9Wtv3I

Pictured below are Frudakis and Gaylor at the HCNR hearing.



The bill then advanced through the committee process, and on September 15 the House Committee on Natural Resources favorably reported H.R. 9600. The committee described the legislation as authorizing the Thomas Paine Memorial to be located within Area One near the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Upon hearing the news of HCNR's unanimous support, Gaylor said: "We're one step closer to getting our Forgotten Founder, Thomas Paine, the recognition he deserves in our nation's capital. We are grateful to Chair Bruce Westerman, Ranking Member Jared Huffman and Representatives Jamie Raskin and Victoria Spartz for getting us here. There is no more meaningful way for Congress to commemorate our nation's 250th anniversary than by ensuring this long-overdue acknowledgment of the Revolution's principal champion for independence."

Frudakis said: "As the sculptor, it is a privilege to give physical form to a man whose ideas helped change the course of American history and to create a work that will introduce Thomas Paine and his legacy to generations yet to come."

For TPMA, the committee action represents an important milestone in a project that began with a simple goal: to ensure that Thomas Paine has a permanent memorial in the capital of the country whose independence he helped inspire. Paine's historical importance is unusually broad. Arriving in America from England in 1774 after an invitation from **Benjamin Franklin**, Paine quickly became one of the most influential voices of the American Revolution.

In January 1776, he published *Common Sense*, a pamphlet that presented the case for American independence in language accessible to ordinary colonists. Its enormous circulation helped bring the question of independence into the public conversation at a crucial moment in American history.

Paine did not stop at writing. He supported the revolutionary cause financially, relinquishing the copyright to *Common Sense* and directing proceeds toward the Continental Army. In 1776, he enlisted as a private and accompanied **George Washington's** army during its difficult winter campaign. That experience inspired the first of his *American Crisis* papers, beginning with the famous words, "These are the times that try men's souls."

Paine subsequently continued to contribute to the intellectual foundations of the new republic through works including *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*. His influence extended well beyond the American Revolution, touching debates over representative government, individual rights, democracy, and the relationship between government and religion.

The proposed memorial will be a lasting educational reminder of Paine's contributions to the founding of the United States and to the democratic ideals that followed the Revolution. The site will become a place for locals and tourists to meet, exchange ideas, and socialize. The Association believes that placing Paine in Area One will provide an opportunity for millions of visitors to encounter a figure whose words helped change the course of American history that echoed around the world.

TPMA President **Margaret Downey** has represented the Association before NCMAC and has worked with congressional offices and supporters to move the project forward.

"The Thomas Paine Memorial Association has spent years navigating the federal memorial process because we believe Thomas Paine deserves a permanent place in the nation's capital," Downey said. "NCMAC's recommendation for Area One was an important milestone. H.R. 9600 gives Congress the opportunity to take the next step by approving that location."

She added: "We are grateful to Representatives Jamie Raskin and Victoria Spartz for introducing this legislation and to the members of the House Natural Resources Committee for moving it forward. We also appreciate everyone who has helped us reach this point. The goal is not simply to build a statue. It is to make sure that future generations who visit Washington understand the extraordinary role Thomas Paine played in the founding of the United States."

The committee's action does not complete the legislative process. H.R. 9600 must still proceed through the House and, if enacted there, through the Senate and ultimately to the President. For TPMA, however, the committee action marks an important transition. What began as a 2022 congressional authorization to create a Thomas Paine memorial has now progressed through the federal site-selection process, received NCMAC's recommendation for Area One and advanced to legislation specifically addressing congressional approval of that location.

The Association's objective remains straightforward: to establish a permanent Thomas Paine memorial in Washington, D.C., where Americans and visitors from around the world can learn about the man whose words helped give voice to the American Revolution. Two hundred and fifty years after *Common Sense* challenged the colonies to imagine a nation independent of a monarchy, Thomas Paine is finally moving closer to having a permanent place in the nation's capital. TPMA intends to see that journey through. For more information about this project, visit the TPMA website at:

https://thomaspainememorial.org



The National Park Service and the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission opened an online public opinion page that accepted commentary between the dates of August 11 and September 10, 2026. The Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA) is pleased to announce that 686 people participated in the public commentary and set an unprecedented record! If you participated, thank you very much. TPMA thanks the following organizations for promoting the public commentary opportunity in support of the Washington, D.C. Thomas Paine memorial: Freedom From Religion Foundation, Florida Veterans for Common Sense, The Freethought Society, Center for Inquiry, The World Union of Deists, Secular Coalition for America, and The Thomas Paine Historical Association.

No Exemptions for the Faithful: What Belief Trades for the Comfort of Being Right

by Olga Bourlin

In the book of Exodus, while Moses was on the mountain receiving the commandments, the people below grew impatient and made a god out of their own gold. They bowed to it, fed it, and called it holy. The conventional reading treats this as a story about false idols. Its more useful lesson concerns what happens when a group decides in advance what it wants to believe, then looks for authority to confirm it.

That habit crosses party lines, and religious language is unusually good at disguising it as something else.

Browse religious commentary online for a week and you will encounter some version of the same essay written from opposite ends of the political spectrum and driven by the same rhetorical machinery.

One camp argues that supporting Donald Trump is a form of idolatry: professed Christians, it says, have exchanged obedience to Christ for obedience to a man, and the fruit of that allegiance bears little resemblance to the fruit of the Spirit.

Another camp, further along the spectrum, directs the same charge at progressive commitments: idolatry of the state, idolatry of identity, a golden calf fashioned from secular politics rather than religious ones.

Both essays begin with Exodus. Both summon the same handful of verses. Both conclude that their political opponents have mistaken their politics for their god. It rarely occurs to either author that the more vital question is not whether the argument is true of the other side, but why the argument works so well regardless of who is making it.

That raises a harder question than which side is right. If the same religious text can be marshaled in support of opposite political conclusions, each advanced with equal certainty, then the text is not doing all the moral work. The reader has arrived with convictions already in hand and found, within a long, ancient, and multiply-authored collection of writings, the passages needed to confirm them. A sufficiently motivated reader can make such a text appear to endorse almost any conclusion.

Consider the Jesus these essays invoke. He is consistently the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount: gentle, inclusive, preoccupied with the poor and the outcast, opposed to domination and hierarchy. That Jesus exists in the text.

So does the Jesus who drives merchants from the temple with a whip of cords, who says he came not to bring peace but a sword and to turn family members against each other, who curses a fig tree for the crime of being out of season, who calls religious leaders a brood of vipers and white-washed tombs, and who describes, across several parables, a specific and permanent punishment for people who fail his standards.

The gentle Jesus and the wrathful Jesus are in the same book, read selectively depending on what the reader already needs to be true. Choosing one and calling it authentic, while treating the other as an embarrassing aberration, is not theology. It's cherry picking.

The same selective reading extends backward into the Old Testament, which these essays often treat as the wrathful prequel to the New Testament's mercy. Yet Jesus himself says that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it, and the line most frequently invoked in this entire genre — love your neighbor as yourself — is not a New Testament invention. It is a direct quotation from Leviticus 19:18 (KJV), which commands:

> *"Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD."*

The familiar division between a harsh old covenant and a loving new one is therefore less a distinction the text itself insists upon than a convenient way of reading it.

None of this means the political criticisms in these essays are wrong. The mistreatment of vulnerable people remains wrong whether or not a particular verse can be marshaled against it. But scripture is not what makes it wrong, and pretending otherwise concedes something it should not: that morality requires religious permission to be valid, and that those outside the religion are somehow less entitled to make the judgment. That is a strange thing for a moral argument to do to itself, since it effectively excludes much of the country from the conversation. If the mistreatment of vulnerable people is wrong, it is wrong regardless of which political tribe practices it and whether or not Leviticus or the Sermon on the Mount condemns it.

The Stoics, who regarded cruelty as a form of weakness, arrived at their conception of universal human obligation without a single gospel. The humanist tradition that followed them arrived there again. So, for that matter, have plenty of people who have never opened a Bible and would be surprised to learn that their sense of right and wrong required a citation.

For many of these writers, kindness and moral seriousness may have come first, with theology assembled afterward to explain and authorize dispositions that already existed. The political scientist **Michele Margolis** has made a documented case for something like this: partisan identity, formed early, often shapes a person's later religious commitments more than religious teaching shapes their politics, reversing the direction most people assume. If that is even partly right, many of these authors are simply decent, humane people who have declined to give themselves credit for it, attributing their compassion to a gentle Jesus rather than recognizing it as a feature of their own character. At the same time, they set aside those parts of their tradition that complicate the story, the doctrine of hell chief among them.

Political loyalty does not cease to shape moral judgment when the politics are conservative. Christians who excuse in

a political ally what they would condemn in a stranger are not discovering a permissive theology; they are manufacturing one, because the alternative would cost them the coalition. A vote for a party is not a footnote to that party's platform; it is an endorsement of what the party does with power, whether or not the individual voter privately winces at the particulars. The distinction sometimes drawn between "MAGA Christians" and garden-variety Christian Republicans, as though the first group were an aberration and the second somehow innocent, becomes difficult to maintain once voting is understood as an exercise of political power. There is no exemption at the ballot box for having checked the box while disapproving of what the box does.

Both errors trace back to the same source: certainty borrowed from a text flexible enough to authorize whichever conclusion its reader already wanted.

History supplies the evidence that this has never been a fringe problem. The Crusades were preached from pulpits, and the Inquisition ran its tribunals with trained theologians presiding. American slavery was defended from scripture at length and in detail, by people who considered themselves faithful. None of this required a misreading, only a selective one — the same skill on display in every "Jesus would never" essay written this year, on either side, about either party.

None of this is specific to Christianity. Every tradition generates its own version of the golden calf — its own objects, garments, and gestures elevated past the reach of ordinary scrutiny — and history is not short on people who killed or died over which version was the true one: Sunni against Shia, Shaivite against Vaishnavite, rival Buddhist schools in medieval Japan and, in the present day, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The tragedy is not that humans disagree about the sacred. It's that the certainty required to kill over the disagreement rarely rests on anything sturdier than the certainty this essay has already described: a text, symbol, or practice, read the way its holder already needed it read.

What would it take to argue about political cruelty without needing scripture to adjudicate it? Less insistence on already being right, for one thing, and more willingness to say plainly that a policy is wrong because of what it does to actual people, not because a two-thousand-year-old text can be made to agree. It's a harder case to make, because it gives up the shortcut of letting a verse settle the matter. But it's the only approach that works in a diverse society, where a policy's body count matters more than its theological backing.

The golden calf was made of metal, but its true currency was submission. Modern idols no longer require statues.

They only require a place where questions go to die.

Sources:

Exodus 32; Matthew 5:17; Matthew 10:34–36; Matthew 21:12–13; Matthew 23; Mark 11:12–14; Leviticus 19:18 (KJV).

Michele Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Background on sectarian religious violence (Crusades, Inquisition, the Sunni-Shia schism, Buddhist-nationalist violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka): Encyclopedia Britannica, relevant entries.

About the Author:



Olga Bourlin is a regular contributor to *The Freethought Society News*. Olga's past ezine submissions can be found at the following FS website page:

https://www.ftsociety.org/olga-bourlin-articles/

Olga also writes for Substack and her page covers a wide range of subjects. Visit the link below to subscribe for free:

https://olgabourlin.substack.com/p/borrowing-disability

Olga welcomes hearing from readers. Contact her at the following email address:

olgabourlin.substack@gmail.com



The Freethought Society editorial team is highly recommending the following book by David C. Hoffman:

American Freethought: The History of a Social Movement, 1794-1948

The book is available from the Johns Hopkins online bookstore, Freedom from Religion Foundation, and other fine booksellers (including Amazon). Hoffman is a Professor in Baruch College's Marxe School of Public and International Affairs, where he also serves as Faculty Director of the MPA program. He spent decades as a scholar of the great freethinker **Thomas Paine** before writing this wholistic history of the American freethought movement.

The Story of American Freethought

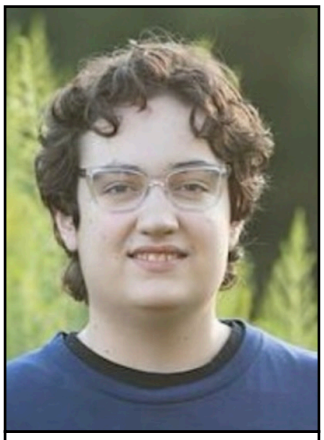
IGNITE & EMPOWER
AMERICAN FREETHOUGHT

Discover the independent thinkers who reshaped the religious landscape of the United States. In ***American Freethought: The History of a Social Movement, 1794-1948,*** David C. Hoffman reveals the surprising history of the social movement that secured our freedom of individual conscience.

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Curiosity, Conviction, and Community: Finding My Place as a Secular Activist

by Kaylee Gill



Kaylee Gill is a senior at the Dallastown Area High School in Pennsylvania. Her essay, printed here, was selected as the winner of the annual FS $1,000 scholarship.

The first question on the Freethought Society (FS)/Secular Student Alliance (SSA) student scholarship application was, "What are your educational, career, and life goals?"

If asked this question only about three years ago, I would have answered completely differently. I would have said that my favorite classes were art and writing, and that I wanted to pursue a creative career.

For me, this changed very abruptly when I took the required "general science" course for incoming freshmen at my high school. The class consisted of two parts: half chemistry, half physics. It was the first time that I got to do "real" chemistry experiments in the science lab (bunsen burners, test tubes, safety goggles, all that stereotypical stuff), the first time I got to pursue my own research for the district science fair, and the first time I was tasked with using my understanding to solve open-ended problems on my own.

I realized that science was far more interesting than I originally thought. Now, the subjects that speak the most to me academically are the natural sciences and math: I like figuring out how to solve problems using what I know to be true. I like learning about "why" things work the way they do. Academically and career-wise, I am planning on pursuing a degree in some form of engineering or physics after I graduate high school.

Although I am no longer interested in art as a career or academic pursuit, I still value the arts and create poetry and drawings in my free time. I don't believe in an arbitrary divide between the arts and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). There's no reason why both lines of study can't be fulfilling at the same time. My life goals, personally, are to pursue knowledge and understanding of the world around me. Chemistry, physics, engineering, literature, language — I want to learn about them all.

I consider myself to be a secularist atheist. Like many people in the United States, I was raised Christian. I believed sincerely until around 2020 — which I think is safe to say was an odd time for all of us.

I was in fifth grade. My mind was starting to mature, and in the back of my mind I knew that something wasn't adding up. It waxed and waned like some form of chronic pain. Sometimes I was sure that my religion was real. Other times I was doubting anxiously. I don't remember exactly when the nagging doubt started, but I do remember one potent moment: I had a dream that I was in a classroom similar to the one I had in second grade. Dream logic told me that we were learning about some strange, ancient mythologies. I can't remember any details other than a replica of some tall black temple that was in the room. One kid piped up something like: "These are beliefs, right?"

When I woke up I had that stubborn nagging doubt flare up. "Beliefs." What was so special about the religion I was raised in? It is not controversial at all to consider ancient mythologies just fantasy. What makes mine any different?

I started to read/watch/listen to Christian stories to try to dampen the nagging doubt, which nonetheless evolved into acceptance that my religion likely wasn't real. After about a year, I decided to "come out," via an email, to my parents and close friend that I considered myself an atheist.

Surprisingly, they were all open to my secular identity. I view these identities as innate parts of myself, as extensions of my curiosity and drive for justice. No matter what circumstances I could have been born in, I truly believe I would find my secular self in one way or another.

To me, my rejection of religion is both a political stance and a personal identity. Politically, my secularism is an opposition to religion's influence on government. Personally, my atheism is a rejection of superstition and a refusal to change myself to accommodate any religion.

It is hard to overstate how much my secular identity encompasses, informs, and drives my life. My secular identity means living free of the pressure to please invisible beings. My secular identity means fighting against the science denial, the healthcare restrictions, the bigotry that comes from a religiously influenced government. My secular identity means doing things that help people above all else. I don't put garlic on my door to ward off vampires in case they are real. I don't carry silver to fight off werewolves in case they are real. I don't make sacrifices to keep Zeus at bay in case he is real. So why should I live my life accommodating the God of Abraham?

Saying that my family was entirely open to my secular identity when I sent them that email was a bit of a simplification. They didn't disown me, they didn't force me to go back to church, they didn't scream that I was going to hell, but my mom was in fact worried about me. She wasn't worried that I would face punishment from some supernatural being, she was worried that I would feel alone.

I don't fault her for her concern, but I also think that every atheist can agree with me when I say that the idea that a life without God(s) is a sentence to be alone is deeply insulting. There is more to life, to love, to community than religion. This is the point at which my secular identity meets and parallels my other identities: I am queer (asexual, aromantic) and autistic.

My autism means, in addition to many other effects, that I interact with people differently. I tend to avoid the large gatherings that many others consider the focal point of their social life. I prefer to talk about only things that interest me, which to an outsider looks like I am asocial. It can be hard to explain to other people that I am not lonely.

(continued)

Although I am not “out” to many people as queer, it is clear to anyone close to me that I do not take an interest in romantic relationships or find people physically attractive. I’ve had people tell me that they’re sad that I won’t have a “life partner,” but I honestly just find it confusing as to why they think marriage and dating are the only valuable relationships.

Similar to being atheist, being asexual and aromantic means living a life “lacking” something that most other people consider central to being fulfilled in life.

I find it a bit humorous how this combination of identity simultaneously contradicts two ignorant stereotypes: the belief that atheists are people who knowingly reject God in order to engage in sexual sin, and the belief that asexual people must only identify that way because they are repressed/celibate due to being deeply religious. The link between these identities is being perceived as being lonely, isolated, or even antisocial due to non-action: declining something that you see as pointless or undesirable, but most others view as integral to their lives.

Secular activism is, admittedly, something that I haven’t involved myself with much yet. I hope to change that next year as president of my SSA chapter, and throughout my life in general.

I have been a member of my high school's SSA chapter since my sophomore year. Since I joined, our chapter has always been small and never really did anything to stand out on campus. I never really spoke outwardly about secularism outside of club meetings. To be fair, I did usually become the leader of discussions we did have. I never really had an opportunity to latch onto, and on my part I was sort of scared to publicly attach myself to such a cause.

The one time I did speak about secularism was, somewhat anti-climatically, for a presentation. We needed to research an issue in society and present it to the class. I knew immediately that I wanted to do mine about religious influences in the government — ways in which our right to freedom of religion is not respected. I knew it was a touchy topic, especially in comparison to the mountains of trite presentations about social media. I mean no hate to my classmates!

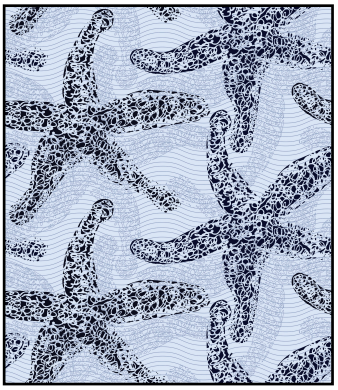
In my presentation I would be talking about things like the Pledge of Allegiance, Young Earth Creationism, and of course the displaying of a Protestant version of Ten Commandments in classrooms.

Fearing that I might face punishment if I slipped up and offended someone’s religious beliefs, I asked the teacher if I would be allowed to do that topic. She said something along the lines of, “Tell the people who said you might get in trouble for offending someone that they are stupid. Follow your passions.”

I sort of regret not taking those comments to heart sooner, but I hope to change that in the future as I become more actively involved in SSA. I got 100% on the presentation by the way.

In addition to being a member of the SSA, I am also a member of my school’s Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) and will be vice president in the coming year. As part of the GSA, I have never been hesitant to publicly appear as a member of the club. I appeared at tables during lunch and helped draw in new members at our high school’s annual club fair.

I also have, now twice, participated in the Day of Silence demonstration as part of the GSA. Day of Silence is a peaceful, on-campus demonstration where participants take a vow of silence and refuse to speak for the full day. The refusal to speak is symbolic of how queer voices are silenced when bigotry is allowed to fester. Unrelated to the GSA, I also participated in a peaceful anti-Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) protest with a group of around 30 students. After school hours we walked through the neighborhood carrying signs with facts about ICE. I helped to make signs and spread information about the protest to like-minded students. The protest made it onto the local news. Being involved in these spaces is very rewarding, but I see a lot of people who feel utterly hopeless at the state of the world. That is why I am also passionate about spreading community joy.



I like to think about the story where thousands of starfish wash up on the shore after a storm. There are so many that saving them all is impossible, but someone picks just one up and throws it back into the ocean and thinks, “I made a difference to that one.” That is my mindset when it comes to these topics. I can’t fix everything on my own, but doing something that makes just one person happy is still a difference.

As part of the GSA, I create original sticker designs using pride flags. I print and cut them myself to give away for free at meetings. I draw them so the digital file can be easily recolored to the stripes of any pride flag. Even those who feel represented by more obscure flags can feel seen. I love seeing the other members excitedly dig through the box of stickers I bring to every meeting, and I love seeing my art on various water bottles, folders, and notebooks around the school.

In the same vein, I recently established a “trinket trade” box out in front of my local library. The trinket trade is a fun community project where anyone can bring a small item to trade for something else left in the box. I wanted to bring something fun to the community and to bring traffic to the library. The staff helped me greatly with the project. I believe that activism takes many forms. Of course, striking demonstrations and public visibility are important and vital to progress, but small things that give us the hope are needed to keep us going. Things like stickers and trinkets, are also valuable.

Proceeding into my senior year, I am determined to use this time to make an impact and leave a legacy that will outlast my graduation. I will continue to be an active member of my school’s GSA (as the vice president) and participate in demonstrations such as Day of Silence, but as for secular activism, I am the president of my school’s SSA chapter this coming year.

Last year, our SSA chapter struggled greatly with attendance, with only around 10 students consistently attending — many of whom were going to graduate that year.

We tried to do some activism such as a fundraiser, and celebrating some calendar holidays, but due to a combination

of this low attendance and issues with securing an advisor we were never able to execute anything of significance. The current leaders were starting to worry that the chapter would entirely fizzle out next year. I and two other friends were the only ones who stepped up to take on the needed leadership roles. Unfortunately, we didn't even have enough people to hold a proper election!

My main goal as president of the SSA chapter is to be more visible. I want to do more for the holidays, I want to table at lunch, and I want to do the fundraisers we could never finalize in years prior. If nothing else, I just want to make our SSA chapter — and by extension, secular and atheist students — more visible.

In addition, I am currently working with my guidance counselor to start a disability activism club on campus. At our school, many neurodivergent friends of mine had issues with the actions of the school. Some were forced to attend loud school events and suffered panic attacks, migraines, and pain. There was also an instance where the school played music loudly over the PA system throughout the entire school, which also triggered sensory issues for these students.

I figured that an advocacy-focused club would be a good way to give disabled students a voice when it comes to these seemingly benign things that most neurotypical/able- bodied people wouldn't think about when it comes to disability accommodation. I plan to collaborate with the special education professionals to ensure the club is well organized and beneficial. Broadly speaking, my plans for activism is to fill in gaps that I see need to be filled — mainly, an active/visible SSA and disability advocacy. Hopefully, these projects can remain viable long after I leave this school.

Being secular and atheist can feel lonely, but not because I do not believe in God(s). It feels lonely because the Ten Commandments are being placed in classrooms. It feels lonely because the bible is being added to school curriculums. It feels lonely because our culture and government are becoming increasingly influenced by religion. The work of SSA is important to me politically as someone who strongly believes in the separation between church and state, but it also personally.

Being able to be involved in an organization where I can work with like-minded people is deeply rewarding. It gives me hope, and we cannot work towards a better secular future for everyone if we don't have hope.

I struggle with adjusting to new environments due to autism and I am unable to have a roommate due to needing solitude in order to regulate sensory input. Not an exaggeration, even staying in a hotel room for a few days with family will have me feeling exhausted and miserable!

I plan to attend Penn State for my degree, which appeals to me because of the school's good reputation for engineering and recognizability. I was originally going to attend Penn State York for the first two years, which would allow me to stay at home to accommodate my autism and save money. However, that campus is closing. This means that I will likely need to live on campus or away from home for all four years. Most campus/near-campus living spaces would simply not work for my needs. This FS/SSA scholarship would help me pay for housing that will allow me to live healthily and comfortably as an autistic college student. ◻

Note: *Please earmark a donation to the* ***Freethought Society*** *for a 2027 secular student scholarship.*

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"No Prophets" in Philadelphia: An Afternoon with Congressman Jared Huffman

On Saturday, September 12, 2026, the Freethought Society (FS) cosponsored an event that featured a discussion between Congressman **Jared Huffman** (D-CA2), who is the only sitting Representative in Congress, proudly declaring himself a nontheist, and Dr. **Michael Mann**.

Mann is the Presidential Distinguished Professor of Environmental and Earth Science at the University of Pennsylvania.

The event was titled "An Afternoon with Free Thought Champions." The main topic was how Christian Nationalism is shaping policy in the Capitol and how supporters of secular government are fighting back.



Standing at the Freethought Society's free literature table are left to right **Debbie Goddard**, a newly elected Freethought Society board member, **David Condo**, and **Sarah Levin**.

The event was hosted by the Free Thought Fellowship Foundation (FTFF) and was held at the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES). **David Condo**, vice president of FS, helped FTFF and PES with logistics and security for the day; he also staffed a table for FS before and after the event to discuss the organization's initiatives and volunteer opportunities with attendees.

The afternoon started off with welcoming remarks from **Susan Brotherton,** Chair of the PES Education Committee and **Sarah Levin**, Founder, Executive Director, and Board Chair of FTFF. Former Congresswoman **Susan Wild** (pictured below) then spoke about what it was like being one of the first members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus (CFC), which was cofounded by Huffman and Congressman **Jamie Raskin**.



Susan Wild is an American politician and lawyer who served as the United States representative for Pennsylvania's 7th congressional district (Lehigh Valley region of eastern Pennsylvania, Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, and Bangor) from 2018 to 2025. In 2025 Wild received *The Thomas Paine Common Sense Award* at a Congressional Freethought Caucus Reason Reception.

Wild said that she did not get as much pushback from her constituents for joining the CFC as she expected. She, in fact, received a lot of support from people — especially younger people — for taking a strong stance on the issue of separation of government and religion.

Newly elected Congressman **Chris Rabb** (D-PA3) was also a featured speaker at the event. He said that Huffman supported him even when he was not a front-running candidate, and he thanked Huffman for helping him come out of the closet as a proud agnostic. Rabb also said that he is introducing legislation in Pennsylvania that will be "Promoting Liberty and Upholding the Rights of All Learners Act" (also known as the "PLURAL Act"). The Act is a model legislative proposal and cosponsorship initiative designed to protect students' constitutional rights and intended to uphold religious neutrality in public schools.

Huffman appreciated the support of his colleagues, and he made Rabb and the audience laugh when he said that Rabb's decision to be openly nonreligious in Congress would be met with "a collective yawn." Huffman explained that while many politicians still view not being religious as a huge liability, it is not the deal-breaker people think it is. Pushback is dependent on the representative's other work and the priorities of their constituents.

Mann asked Huffman about why he has been more outspoken about Humanism, how religion has influenced government policy, and what threat domestic religious extremist groups pose to our nation's security.

Huffman explained that blind faith, especially beliefs about an apocalypse, have influenced key government officials and representatives. Huffman used United States Secretary of Defense **Pete Hegseth**'s military crusade philosophy as one of the most obvious and devastating examples.

Huffman also spoke about a few congressional colleagues who would not support climate change legislation. Their lack of support is not because they disagreed with the science, but because the Bible already states that climate change is not how the world ends.

Huffman told the audience how the congressional report on the January 6th Capitol riots had originally included significant information about the role that Christian Nationalism played in the riots, The information, however, was deliberately removed after a key committee member did not want to offend certain Christians.

Such irrational views are not new and Huffman noted that even in **Benjamin Franklin**'s time, church leaders said that

they were against his lightning rod because it was interfering with God's will. However, the potential impact of religious extremism in the United States government — including the seldom-discussed goals of Christian Zionism — is greater than ever before.

Despite these very real concerns, Huffman conveyed a message of hope to the audience. He highlighted the efforts of secular organizations like FS, the American Humanist Association, and American Atheists. He spoke about interfaith efforts to keep religion separate from government, and he pointed out that we still have the legislative and constitutional tools to protect our freedoms, but only if politicians and judges have the courage to use the tools properly. Several of the attendees during the question and answer session reiterated his points that people are becoming more informed about the problem and more motivated to support solutions.

After the event, Huffman signed copies of his new book, *No Prophets: The Fight to Save Democracy from Christian Nationalism.* The book goes into more detail about the issues mentioned above. Huffman also encouraged everybody to lobby their representatives to join CFC. Politicians with a variety of religious views are joining the effort, and there are many allies we can reach by spreading the word. More information about CFC can be found at the link below:

https://freethoughtcaucus-huffman.house.gov/

Ask your representative to become a member of CFC and send the above link to your Congressperson!

Add the **Jared Huffman** book, *No Prophets* to your library. It can be found online and through your local booksellers. It is also available as an **Audible** book!





Admission to the September 12, 2026 event included Congressman **Jared Huffman**'s book. Left to right are **Kevin Jagoe**, Education Director for the American Humanist Association; **Geoffrey Blackwell**, Legal Director & General Counsel for American Atheists; Congressman Huffman, **Dan Hoffman** from the Philadelphia Ethical Society, and **David Condo** from the Freethought Society. The photo was taken as the group awaited a book inscription from Huffman.

Past Freethought Society Meetings Available Online

Since 2020, the Freethought Society (FS) has conducted meetings online, rather than in-person. Spurred by the Covid pandemic, the switch to Zoom opened a new form of outreach. FS has hosted speakers from other countries and audience members have joined the meetings from places, such as Denmark, England, South America, and India.

Please visit the FS YouTube channel to find past meeting recordings. Visit the below link to subscribe:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8PXwTm8UpzkxAezBWUoFew

Following are a few popular additions to the channel:

"Building A God"
Speaker: **Christopher DiCarlo**
https://youtu.be/-7oy6AyD8WM

"The Misinformation Trap and Changing Minds: My Journey from Creationist to Biologist"
Speaker: **Melanie Trecek-King**
https://youtu.be/FoDJjHKG1OY

"Seth Andrews vs. God: Who is the Better Intelligent Designer?"
Speaker: **Seth Andrews**
https://youtu.be/8kbrC-9tdo8

Freethought Society Calendar Page

To receive notices about Zoom events, become a member of The Freethought Society Meetup group. Join at: **https://www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/**. Each listing will have a unique Zoom link listed in the description of the event. FS meetings have security features and will be recorded for replay on social media. Those who join the meeting consent to be recorded and agree to abide by the FS Anti-Harassment and Code of Conduct Policy found at the FS webpage: **https://www.ftsociety.org/freethought-society-code-of-conduct/**

November 1

On **Sunday**, **November 1**, **2026** the Freethought Society (FS) and other secular sponsors will host the annual online International Secular Day of the Dead/Dia de los Muertos Secular celebration of life. The event will start at **Noon Pacific Time/3:00 PM Eastern Time**. The online event requires pre-registration at the following Zoom link:

https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/zK3TOm4yQn2RVKvTKquIkw#/registration

If you would like to honor a deceased loved one or family pet via a 5-10-minute video instead of in-person at the time of the event, please send submissions to:

margaret@FtSociety.org

The hosts of this event are **Margaret Downey** and **Memo Benumea**. The welcome speaker will be actor, producer, and director **Jon Huertas**.

Dan Barker will honor the life of his beloved brother **Darrell Barker**. **Annie Laurie Gaylor** will be honoring American journalist, writer, feminist, and political activist **Gloria Steinem**. Benumea will honor the life of writer, editor, and artist **Adalisa Zárate**. **David Tamayo,** founder and president of Hispanic American Freethinkers, will honor the life of his mother-in-law **Domitila Castillo-Tapia**.

Cohosting groups are American Humanist Association, Black Nonbelievers, Center for Inquiry, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Freethought Society, Hispanic American Freethinkers, and the Secular Coalition for America.

December 6

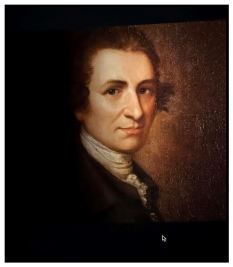
Please save the date of **Sunday**, **December 6**, **2026** to attend the Freethought Society and Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) annual decorating of the *Tree of Knowledge* at **11:00 AM EST**. The event will talk place at the PES building located at;

Philadelphia Ethical Society Building, 1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

For additional updated information about speakers and planned events visit the website at the below link:

https://phillyethics.org/calendar

January 29



The Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA) and other cosponsors are planning the annual Zoom celebration of the birth of **Thomas Paine**. According to the Gregorian calendar, Paine was born on February 9, 1737.

All of his original birth records, however, were recorded under the Old Style Julian calendar, listing his birth date as January 29, 1736. The difference in dates exists because Great Britain and its colonies transitioned from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar and changed the official start of the new year during Paine's lifetime. TPMA prefers to recognize January 29 — the date recorded in the original historical documents — as his official and best-documented birth date.

The **Friday**, **January 29**, **2027**, event (**4:00 PM Pacific**/**7:00 PM Eastern**) entitled, "Celebrating the Poet and the Friend," will highlight Paine's newly discovered works, identified through sophisticated computer-assisted analysis and extensive historical research. Pre-registration is required. Below is the registration link:

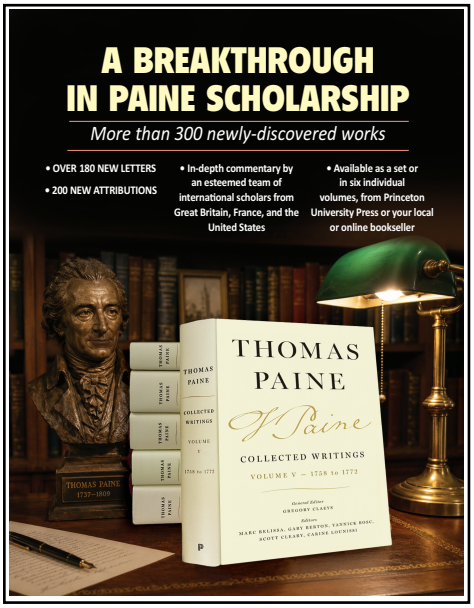
https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/FnCOdbMZSei_TcEbHPo2Zw

The program will feature presentations on Paine's literary writings before, during, and after his arrival in the American colonies in 1774. His personal letters and poetry he enjoyed writing will be highlighted with special guest appearances (TBA)

A welcome address from Representatives **Jamie Raskin** and **Victoria Spartz** will start the program. Hosts of the event are TPMA president **Margaret Downey** and board member **Christopher Cameron**. Special guests include Paine researchers **Gary Berton** and **Scott Cleary**.

TPMA is pleased to announce that a 40% discount on the below pictured book collection is available to readers of this ezine. To order a set from Princeton University Press, please use the below link and the discount code of **PAINE40**:

https://press.princeton.edu/collected-works/thomas-paine



The *Thomas Paine Collected Works* set is widely praised by reviewers and readers for offering the most authoritative, comprehensive, and durable single-volume collection of Thomas Paine's revolutionary works available.

The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates for separation of religion and government. We assist nontheists, educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas.

FS publishes *The Freethought Society News* every other month. The publication link is sent in an email notification and is complimentary to supporters, donors, and those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in locations across the United States via Zoom or in-person when possible. FS activities and services depend on financial contributions from supporters. Funds may be sent using this form or via the FS website (**www.FtSociety.org/donate/**). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). Donations can be earmarked for use in a committee (see list below), project, and/or an event. Donations not earmarked will be applied to a general fund which finances office-related expenses. Please donate generously. Check below if you would like to:

( ) become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to The Freethought Society):
$35 Individual Supporter $45 Family Supporter $25 Student $1,000 Supporter for a Lifetime
( ) become a "Freethought Star" by setting up an automatic monthly donation to FS from my bank or through:
PayPal in the amount of (circle one): $5 $10 $15 $20 $25 $30 $35 $40 $45 $50 $55 $_____other (per month)
( ) earmark a donation to (insert project, event or committee name): _____

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State, and Zip: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone: _____Cell: _____
( ) Check here if you prefer your sponsorship to remain anonymous.

FS will send a complimentary ezine to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS publication. FS will never share or sell a subscriber's contact information.

Name: _____Email: _____

Mail this form to: Freethought Society, 19744 Beach Blvd. #140, Huntington Beach, CA 92648 or scan and email this form to: Ezine@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Opportunities Through The Freethought Society

Supporters of FS often want to do more than just make a financial contribution. Listed below are committees designed to fulfill the mission, goals, and vision of FS. Volunteers are needed in all committees listed. Please contact FS to volunteer at:

volunteers@FtSociety.org

Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee
(nontheism explained in classroom settings)

Community Outreach
(locate tabling opportunities)

Diversity Outreach Committee
(developing programs to appeal to underrepresented groups)

Free Speech Zone Committee
(research and implement displays in public venues)

Freethinkers Supporting Safe Streets
(fosters communication with law enforcement)

Helping Hands
(provides helpers to seniors in emergency situations)

Jump Into the Jean Pool
(collection of jeans for donations)

Literature Placement for the Incarcerated
(provides freethought literature to prison libraries)

Meetup Committee
(planning events)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators
(schedule, manage speakers, and venues)

Secular Celebrations
(develop new nontheist celebrations)

Sole Searching
(collection of athletic shoes for donations)

Southern California Secular Coalition
(connect, share, and grow together)

Speakers Bureau
(provide FS a resume, photo, and speech subjects/titles)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee
(work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee
(promote and support the concept nationwide)